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What Is *Wen* and Why Is It Made So Terribly Strange?

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Difference in language is perhaps the most obvious expression of cultural difference, and the first sign of a stranger or a foreigner is someone who talks strangely. However, from scholars who study foreign languages, literatures, and cultures, we expect that given their training and experience in diversity, the otherness of the Other may not appear so strange. In reality, however, this may not always be the case. Sometimes, it is precisely these scholars who push cultural difference to the extreme and make the strange appear even stranger. The difference in language is very likely to be exaggerated as indicative of a radically different way of thinking, especially when it is a difference between the Orient and the Occident, the East and the West.

In an article on the difficulty of translating Western concepts into Chinese, Arthur F. Wright observes that "the Chinese was relatively poor in resources for expressing abstractions and general classes or qualities. 'Truth' tended to develop into 'something that is true.' 'Man' tended to be understood as 'the people'—general but not abstract. 'Hope' was difficult to abstract from a series of expectations directed toward specific objects" (287). If the Chinese language is indeed incapable of expressing abstract ideas through the medium of linguistic signs and verbal images, the inevitable inference would

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be that all it can do is to signify exactly what the signifier refers to, to mean what the word literally says, without pointing beyond the literal sense, to another level of meaning: the abstract, the spiritual, the transcendental. From this basic assumption follow a number of significant consequences that have exerted a strong influence on the study of Chinese literature in the West and have helped shape a notion of that literature as something fundamentally different from what is usually understood as imaginative or fictional creation. Transcendence presupposes distance or difference, and the alleged lack of transcendence in Chinese literature is said to be the result of a primordial continuum of all the phenomena in the natural cosmos, of which Chinese writing or literature is conceived as an integral part, rather than a separate and arbitrary human creation trying to represent or imitate nature from the outside, at an ontological and aesthetic distance.

This is, for example, how Stephen Owen interprets the relation between literature and the world in the Chinese tradition. "The term which situates literature in this orderly cosmos is *wen*" (18), says Owen in his exposition of traditional Chinese poetry and poetics. Elaborating on the opening remarks of an early work in Chinese criticism, Liu Xie's (465?-522) *Wenxin diaolong* [The Literary Mind or the Carving of Dragons], Owen explains that *wen* or "aesthetic pattern" is the ultimate realization or "entelechy" through which the natural order of things becomes visible and known:

> All phenomena have an inherent tendency to become manifest in *wen*, and their manifestation is for the sake of being known and felt; only the human mind is capable of itself knowing and feeling, and of that process, literature is the outward manifest form. Literature thus stands as the entelechy, the fully realized form, of a universal process of manifestation. . . . Insofar as the visual arts merely imitate nature's *wen*, they are subject to the Platonic critique of art as a secondary (or tertiary) phenomenon. But in this formulation literature is not truly mimetic: rather it is the final stage in a process of manifestation; and the writer, instead of "re-presenting" the outer world, is in fact only the medium for this last phase of the world's coming-to-be (20).

In this formulation, *wen* as writing and literature is not a human invention to imitate nature, but is part of nature or the natural cosmos itself. Immediately differentiated from Western literature as mimesis or representation, Chinese literature becomes the end-product of a natural process of manifestation, the form in which elements of the world come together and become known and visible in a manner as natural, perhaps one might say, as the crystallization of water into ice. As "the medium for this last phase of the world's coming-to-be," the Chinese poet becomes a vehicle or channel through which nature or the world arrives at its manifestation as *wen* or "aesthetic pattern." Not only is a literary text naturally formed without the poet's conscious effort, but the Chinese written language, the very linguistic constituents of a text, says Owen, "is itself natural" (20). While the Western poet creates, in imitation of God the first Maker, a fictional world *ex nihilo*, the Chinese poet only "participates in the nature that is," and is concerned not

with making up something beautiful yet untrue, but "with the authentic presentation of 'what is,' either interior experience or exterior percept." The Chinese poem thus presents an "uncreated world," and the Chinese poet, following the example of Confucius, "transmits but does not create" (84). In Pauline Yu's work on Chinese poetic imagery, ideas like these also form the basis of her argument. Differentiated from Western literature as imitation of an action, Chinese poetry, says Yu, records "a *literal reaction* of the poet to the world around him and of which he is an integral part." The Chinese poet does not recognize the "disjunctures between true reality and concrete reality, nor between concrete reality and literary work, gaps which may have provoked censure in some quarters but which also establish the possibility of poiesis, fictionality, and the poet's duplication of his heavenly Maker's creative act" (35). In other words, Chinese culture is one that neither has nor recognizes "disjunctures" and "fundamental ontological dualism," and out of such a tradition Chinese poetry is generated as seamlessly connected with the real world. But if Chinese poetry is exempted from the kind of Platonic critique and censure for being thrice removed from truth, it must also forfeit the claim to poiesis, fictionality, and imaginative creation.

Once the Chinese tradition is seen as radically monistic, in which there is no separation between language and the things to which language refers, metaphor and fictionality, the essential features of Western literature become impossible in Chinese. How can a Chinese poet create anything fictional, anything unreal and distanced from nature, when the Chinese language or *wen* is itself natural? In this "monistic" argument, Chinese poems are "literal responses" to the real world, and their meanings are embedded in the here and now, not pointing to a transcendental or allegorical "Something Else." Owen postulates the following as the first of a number of "propositions" concerning Chinese literature:

> In the Chinese literary tradition, a poem is usually presumed to be nonfictional: its statements are taken as strictly true. Meaning is not discovered by a metaphorical operation in which the words of the text point to Something Else. Instead, the empirical world signifies for the poet, and the poem makes that event manifest (34).[1]

Such a proposition has some remarkable implications for practical criticism as they are worked out by Owen in a methodical contrast of generic expectations between a Western reader's experience with a poem by Wordsworth and a Chinese reader's with the Tang poet Du Fu (712-770). However concretely Wordsworth might portray the view of London, seen from Westminster Bridge at dawn on September 3, 1802, it is absolutely inconsequential whether or not he was in fact writing about what he saw at the particular time and place. "The words of the poem are not directed to a historical London in its infinite particularity," says Owen; but they "lead you to something else, to some significance in which the number of vessels on the Thames is utterly irrelevant" (14). The Western poet is concerned not so

much with the historical particularity as with a general meaning that transcends the historical, and the Western reader, cultivated in the same conventions, reads the poem as a fiction addressing something altogether different from London as real and historical presence. But when Du Fu writes about a river scene flooded over by the moonlight, and when he compares the old and lonely poet to a solitary gull on the sands between heaven and earth, his poem, according to Owen, "is not a fiction: it is a unique, factual account of an experience in historical time, a human consciousness encountering, interpreting, and responding to the world" (15). The cultural differences between the Chinese and the Western traditions, as the example is intended to show, become manifest in a set of contrasts or dichotomies: Western fictionality versus Chinese factuality, Western creativity versus Chinese naturalness, Western concerns of the general versus Chinese concerns of the particular, Western metaphorical and transcendental meaning versus Chinese literal and historical sense, and so on and so forth. It is true that the historical context and the motivation for emphasizing cultural differences in contemporary discourse are very different from what they were at the time of Matteo Ricci and his rivals in the Catholic Church in the seventeenth century, and that whatever is now recognized as distinctly Chinese is often appreciated as something unique and valuable, but still the dichotomies and contrasts of Chinese and Western cultural values cannot but remind us of the purist argument advanced in the seventeenth-century rites controversy, which insisted that the heathen Chinese and their language could not possibly convey the concept of God and the divine transcendence in the revealed religion. As in the rites controversy, the dichotomies today are still predicated on the basic distinction between nature and culture, particularity and generality, the concrete and the abstract, and so on. These dichotomies, as Haun Saussy remarks, indicate "a new version, a translation into literary-critical language, of a quarrel as old as the missionary beginnings of European sinology" (36). By setting up similar dichotomies in their effort to emphasize cultural differences, the Catholic purists, says Saussy, seemed to have "anticipated the terms of the literary discussion we had before us a moment ago" (39).

To see *wen* or the Chinese written language as "natural" is indeed one of the entrenched misconceptions in the West, an old misconception that began with the missionary beginnings of European sinology, but one that most sinologists do not take very seriously. It is Ernest Fenollosa with his amateurish, speculative, and inspiring essay, edited and published by Ezra Pound as *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, that has given this curious view its undoubtedly most well-known exposition. In that essay, Fenollosa celebrates the concrete materiality of Chinese writing and its power to evoke images of the natural world, a kind of pictorial writing which, as a medium for poetry, he believes to be superior to the abstract Western alphabetic writing. Chinese poetry written in characters, Fenollosa claims, presents "shorthand pictures of the operations of nature" (8), and in

reading such pictographic characters, "we do not seem to be juggling mental counters, but to be watching *things* work out their own fate" (9). These memorable words effectively express the idea that Western writing is abstract and created arbitrarily in the human mind, whereas Chinese writing is all natural, made of *things* themselves. Through Pound and his imagistic poetics based on such creative misunderstanding, Fenollosa's view of the Chinese written language made a distinct impact on much of modern English and American poetry. Reading Fenollosa's essay and reworking his translation of some Chinese poems, Pound realized the implications of Chinese writing for an innovative poetic method. As Laszlo Géfin observes, Fenollosa's essay laid the basis of a new aesthetics, of what Pound called an ideogrammic method: "the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated particulars capable of suggesting ideas and concepts through their relation" (27). David Perkins captures the effect of Fenollosa's essay on Pound in an excellent brief description:

> The Chinese written language, it appeared, was undeviatingly concrete. Every word was an image; the line was a succession of images. Pound must have wondered how he might achieve an equivalent in English. The Chinese poetic line presented images without syntactical directions. Fenollosa's manuscript "Essay on the Chinese Written Character" pointed out that nature itself is without grammar or syntax, so Chinese poetry may be said to come upon the mind as nature does. However the method might be explained, it was a succession of images without the less active, more abstract parts of language that ordinarily connect and interpret them and it afforded speed, suggestiveness, and economy (463).

The emphasis here is again on the concreteness and naturalness of Chinese writing, on its eschewal of the abstract logic of grammar or syntax to achieve a completely natural effect, which is, so Fenollosa and Pound argue, precisely what poetry should be doing. Insofar as Chinese characters are concerned, Fenollosa and Pound have certainly misunderstood how they actually function, but that, as Géfin argues, is "perhaps the most fruitful misunderstanding in English literature" (31). Of course, the significance of Pound in modern poetry cannot be doubted, and it would be pedantic and pointless to criticize the ideogrammic method on sinological grounds. What I want to point out here is not that Fenollosa and Pound have misunderstood Chinese, but that their misunderstanding reflects more than just an amateurish view, that it resulted from a projection of their own desire onto the Chinese language and poetry, and that to see Chinese writing as concrete and natural is a Western illusion and poetic idealization. The charm of Pound's *Cathay*, as George Steiner argues, lies in the fact that it matches and confirms powerful European anticipations of what China looks like in the Western eye, what Hugh Kenner calls a Western "invention of China." Pound is successsful in creating the charm of his *Cathay*, says Steiner, "not because he or his reader knows so much but because both concur in knowing so little" (359).[2]

In attributing to Chinese characters the power to reveal the mysteries of

nature and art, Fenollosa and Pound continue a long critical genealogy within the Western tradition. As Hwa Yol Jung observes, Fenollosa came from the literary environment of the "American Renaissance" and was especially under the influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson. His fascination with Chinese writing is thus "comparable to Emerson's enchantment with Egyptian hieroglyphics: they all are the emblems of nature beyond whose visual veil there are inscrutable golden secrets which are not readily decipherable to ordinary people" (212). Several centuries earlier, Matteo Ricci had already noted that the Chinese "employ ideographs resembling the hieroglyphic figures of the ancient Egyptians" (26). To see Chinese characters as hieroglyphs seems rather common in the West. Giambattista Vico, for example, remarks that the Chinese "are found writing in hieroglyphs just as the ancient Egyptians did" (32). The fascination with hieroglyphics, with emblems and *impresas*, or "pictures without words," as Ernst Robert Curtius tells us, has continually occupied the minds of Western humanists since the beginning of the fifteenth century (346). Yet no one in modern times knew how to read hieroglyphs until the 1820s, when Jean-François Champollion deciphered Egyptian hieroglyphic writing with the help of the bilingual text of the Rosetta stone. Champollion's works marked the beginning of modern Egyptology and made a strong impression on Emerson and his contemporaries, but as John Irwin argues, that did not put an end to centuries of fanciful misreading of the hieroglyphs. For all their scientific force to demystify ancient Egyptian writing, "Champollion's discoveries did not," says Irwin, "topple the metaphysical school of interpretation" (6), which continued, from a Christian perspective, to search for the prelapsarian language and read the hieroglyphics as "the language of nature, of natural signs—that world of objects created by God to stand as emblems of spiritual facts" (7).[3]

Influenced by a Swedenborgian mysticism, Emerson's notion of the hieroglyphics definitely follows the metaphysical approach, though he was deeply interested in Champollion's works. In his essays, Emerson remarks that the poet "shall use Nature as his hieroglyphic," and that Nature "offers all her creatures to him as a picture-language" (quoted in Irwin 11). These ideas are evidently echoed in Fenollosa's essay on the Chinese characters, which Fenollosa calls, at one point, "visible hieroglyphics" (6). Egyptian hieroglyphs and Chinese characters are all "symbolic pictures" or, in Fenollosa's words, "shorthand pictures" of things in nature, and this notion of hieroglyphic writing can be traced back to the medieval symbolism that reads nature, as Hugh of St. Victor put it, "like a book written by the finger of God" (quoted in Eco 57).[4] In this connection, then, Fenollosa's fascination with Chinese characters as shorthand pictures can be related to the Christian tradition of allegorical reading that "sees the creation of the world as an establishment of a universal symbolic vocabulary" (Fletcher 130).[5] Thus from the Catholic purist in the seventeenth century to Fenollosa in the early twentieth, understanding of *wen* or Chinese writing as natural signs can be said to have come full circle, because the appreciation of the Chinese written lan-

guage as shorthand pictures without grammar is only a small step away from the disparagement of Chinese as being devoid of logic and spirituality. In terms of argument, there is not much difference between Fenollosa's view and that of the Catholic purist; what is entirely different is their attitude, for while the purist despised Chinese for its alleged lack of spirituality, Fenollosa admired Chinese for its supposedly hieroglyphic pictorialism.

Sinologists, of course, know better. James J. Y. Liu begins his concise and useful book, *The Art of Chinese Poetry*, by refuting Fenollosa's misconception that "*all* Chinese characters are pictograms or ideograms;" this, says Liu, is a "fallacy" and "seriously misleading" (3). By expounding the six traditional principles for making Chinese characters, he shows that the majority of characters are not pictograms but "contain a phonetic element" (6). That is to say, to read Chinese characters as "shorthand pictures of the operations of nature" is only to misread them, and the presence of a phonetic element in the majority of Chinese characters immensely complicates matters to such a degree that it is no longer meaningful to talk about the difference between the Chinese and Western languages in terms of a neat contrast between natural and conventional signs, or nonphonetic and phonetic writings. However, *The Art of Chinese Poetry* was first published in 1962, and in his last book twenty five years later, the author changed his mind and, like Owen, cited Liu Xie to argue that "human *wen* ('writing' or 'literature') is a parallel to natural *wen* ('pattern' or 'configuration,' such as constellations, geographical formations, patterns on animal skins, etc.), both being manifestations of cosmic Dao" (*Language-Paradox-Poetics* 18). He now sees Chinese as fundamentally different from Western languages, and commends Fenollosa and Pound for having "sensed intuitively that Chinese characters offered a possible alternative to Western logocentrism" (20). Liu is clearly aware of the inconsistency in his assessment of Fenollosa and Pound, but he insists that his later argument "does not contradict" what he said in *The Art of Chinese Poetry*; instead, it represents "a shift of emphasis because of changed circumstances" (20). This shift indeed reflects the changed circumstances under which he writes, circumstances that have been influenced by contemporary literary theory, especially deconstruction, by Jacques Derrida's view that the nonphonetic Chinese or Japanese scripts offer "the testimony of a powerful movement of civilization developing outside of all logocentrism" (90), and by Derrida's high praise of Fenollosa and Pound for accomplishing an irreducibly graphic poetics which was, "with that of Mallarmé, the first break in the most entrenched Western tradition" (92). These are the circumstances in which cultural relativism, with its emphasis on difference and its doubts about cross-cultural understanding, has become the prevailing paradigm. That a sagacious scholar like James Liu was unable, despite his better judgment, to resist the temptation of winning glory for Chinese writing as a symbol of *différance* testifies to the powerful influence of the relativist paradigm. As a system of natural signs made of things themselves, the peculiar *wen* or Chinese writing thus constitutes the culturally exotic Other

vis-à-vis the conventional, abstract, phonocentric and logocentric Western writing; it conveniently provides the grounds for all sorts of dichotomies and contrasts in literary and cultural studies that establish entire cultures as self-contained entities, as sharply defined systems with unique and identifiable characteristics.

In a long discussion of Chinese poetics, *La valeur allusive*, the French sinologist François Jullien offers yet another example of the Western attempt to see Chinese literature as a specimen of what he calls *l'altérité interculturelle*, a cultural Other that stands for the opposite of the Western tradition. Jullien advocates a "comparatism of difference," arguing that the point of departure of Western sinology, that of examining the Chinese tradition as the Other, is always to "return to the self," that is, to recognize the Western self by differentiating it from the Otherness or alterity of the Chinese, and to look at the self from a different angle, from, as it were, the outside. Although the Western consciousness may be decentered in this *mise en perspective*, it will also be able to "take a new look at its own questions, its own traditions and its own motivations." Jullien goes on to declare: "The Western sinologist can also be—quite legitimately—a discoverer of the West; and sinological knowledge would then serve him as a new *organon*" (8, see also 11-12). The aim of sinological studies is thus predetermined as always the finding of difference, the confirmation of cultural uniqueness, the highlighting of "intercultural alterity" that makes the Western self identifiable vis-à-vis the Other.

In contrasting the Chinese notion of *wen* as natural sign with the Western notion of literature as the imitation of nature, Jullien again draws on Liu Xie's *Wenxin diaolong* for sterling examples. According to Jullien, Liu Xie is able to integrate the advent of human writing and literature into the entire process of cosmic figuration or manifestation by taking advantage of the rich polysemy of the word *wen*, which does not designate an exclusively human design but focuses on shapes and patterns that first unfold in nature. In Liu Xie's discussion, Jullien continues, "while the specificity of literary *wen* is fully affirmed, the relation of derivation between natural *wen* and human *wen* is very consciously elaborated, and thereby the effective complementarity that links the literary work with the beginning of the universe is able to take on its value" (35). Comparing the Chinese notion of *wen* as Liu Xie expounded it with the Greek concept of representation or mimesis, Jullien argues that each of the traditions comes to choose a different alternative: "either it is poetry that 'imitates' nature (as in the case of the classical West) in a movement to 'return' to the world which is the opposite of the independent initiative of art (separated by its original action from the order of nature posited as object); or it is the order of nature that is already 'art' and thus constitutes a precedent with regard to the specific development of the literary text" (52). In the Chinese tradition, which makes the second choice here, the human and the natural integrate into a total vision of symbolic networks, and literary texts are not separated from the order of nature as original human creations: "the poem is already woven without the interference of human consciousness as subject;

or rather, subjective consciousness is from the very start integrated into the process of mutual interactions that makes the whole of mundane realities alive and able to affect one another" (65). Reminiscent of Owen's reading of Liu Xie, the upshot of Jullien's argument is also the claim that *wen* or Chinese literature is fundamentally different from Western mimesis, that it is not a human creation but an integral part of nature or a natural process of manifestation, and that a Chinese poem already exists out there in nature, like a pebble or a shell by the sea, which the poet can readily pick up without the interference of his or her subjective consciousness.

But what is Chinese *wen*, and what are we to make of Liu Xie's comment on it in the beginning chapter of *Wenxin diaolong*?[6] Written about fifteen hundred years ago (496-497), this treatise is deservedly famous as the first systematic study of all the different genres of ancient Chinese writing, even though not all the genres Liu Xie discusses are literary in the narrower sense of the word. In his effort to give writing as much prestige and importance as possible, Liu Xie takes full advantage of the polysemy of the word *wen*, and relates literary writing to all sorts of patterns and configurations in the phenomenal world till writing as human invention becomes mysteriously connected with natural manifestations of the cosmic *tao*, the overarching principle and ultimate origin of all things. This is how Liu Xie's treatise begins:

> Great is the virtue of writing! Why do we say that it was born together with heaven and earth? The dark blue of heaven and the yellow of earth began the blending of all colors; their square and spheric forms started the differentiation of all shapes. Like a pair of holed disks of jade, the sun and the moon exhibit images attached to the sky; shining with splendor, mountains and rivers mark the contours of the ground. This is indeed the writing of tao. Looking upward, we see the radiance above, and looking below, we detect the latent design; the high and the low take their proper positions, and thus the two Great Standards come to exist. To these only man, in whom inborn intelligence concentrates, can add to form the Three Origins. Man is the flower of the five elements and is indeed the mind of heaven and earth. When there is mind, speech is established, and when there is speech, writing takes a clear form. That is the way that nature is (1).

The notion that heaven and earth, the high and the low, establish the two Great Standards, and that man adds to them to form the Three Origins of the universe, comes from commentaries Confucian scholars of the Han dynasty made on the *Book of Changes*.[7] Drawing on such commentaries and merging *wen* as writing with *wen* as any kind of pattern, configuration, or any discernible shape and form in nature and things, Liu Xie's cosmology and his theory of the origination of literary writing, in the words of Wang Yuanhua, in a study dedicated to Liu Xie's work, "assume an extremely confused form" (60). It is confused because Liu Xie has confounded culture with nature, but we can also say that the confusion is deliberate because, by giving writing a cosmic origin, he not only bestows on writing the borrowed authority of nature and expands the concept of writing to a grandiose pro-

portion, but he also subsumes everything natural under the regulation and order of human invention, the *constructed* patterns and designs exemplified by the writings of ancient sages and Confucius himself. In his discussion of *tao*, he also mingles two different views, one from the *Laozi* that depicts *tao* as nonactive and running a natural course regardless of human concerns, and the other from commentaries on the *Book of Changes* that put a greater emphasis on the will of heaven and the agency of the sage, through whose work of mediation the will of heaven is fulfilled. In fusing the Taoism of Laozi and Zhuangzi with the Confucian ideas in the commentaries on the *Book of Changes*, Liu Xie is very much a product of his time. In his tendency to blend the authorities of these different views and traditions and, despite his long involvement with Buddhist ideas, Liu Xie's allegiance in writing his great work of criticism, as many scholars have pointed out, is to Confucianism (see Wang Yunxi and Yang Ming 344). That is to say, Liu Xie's scale finally tilts toward human writing rather than natural pattern, and things in nature can be said to display recognizable patterns only because they intimate the meaning of the universe as a total order, as emanation from the great *tao*. Thus heaven and earth, mountains and rivers, animals and plants, the entire natural world and all the things in it, become a gigantic text inscribed with naturally written characters.

However, if Liu Xie sees nature as generating writing and writing as the manifest form of nature, and if he reads natural configurations as writing and elaborate patterns, does not his view to some extent lend itself to a comparison with the idea of "the book of nature" so often found in Western texts produced in medieval and Renaissance Europe? Curtius provides numerous examples and offers his illuminating commentaries on this poetic topos, from which I want to quote a few lines he wrote on the Spanish dramatist and poet Calderón de la Barca. "Here too," says Curtius, "everything writes: the sun on cosmic space, the ship on the waves, the birds on the tablets of the winds, a shipwrecked man alternately on the blue paper of the sky and the sand of the sea. The rainbow is a stroke of the quill, sleep a written sketch, death the signature of life." The entire cosmos appears in Calderón as a book: "The vault of heaven is a bound book with eleven sapphire leaves (the spheres)" (344). If Curtius knew the work of the Chinese critic, he probably would not object to our adding a few more examples from Liu Xie. "Animals and plants all display *wen*," says Liu. "The dragon and the phoenix present good omen with their elaborate design, the tiger and the leopard show the beauty of composition in their bright pelage, clouds and the light at dawn apply colors more subtly than does a master painter, and trees and flowers bring forth the splendor of florescence unaided by any skillful embroiderer" (1). In this view of cosmic writing, *wen* or the Chinese written language is indeed "itself natural," as Owen remarks. "Writing is not constituted of arbitrary signs, created by historical evolution or divine authority; writing appears from observing the world" (20). But that can hardly be said to characterize Chinese writing as distinct from its Western counterpart, since

Western writing was also, at least before the establishment of modern philology and linguistics, considered to be itself a system of natural signs. "In its raw, historical sixteenth-century being," says Michel Foucault in discussing the Renaissance notion of the book of nature, "language is not an arbitrary system; it has been set down in the world and forms a part of it." The metaphor of the book turns the relation of nature and writing around; it transfers a cultural concept to natural phenomena and "forces language to reside in the world, among the plants, the herbs, the stones, and the animals" (35). Foucault describes the book of nature as a vision in which "the face of the world is covered with blazons, with characters, with ciphers and obscure words—with 'hieroglyphs'," and in which the space becomes "like a vast open book; it bristles with written signs; every page is seen to be filled with strange figures that intertwine and in some places repeat themselves" (27). Reminiscent of Owen on Chinese *wen*, Foucault argues that the Western language, too, must from this perspective "be studied itself as a thing in nature. Like animals, plants, or stars, its elements have their laws of affinity and convenience, their necessary analogies" (35).[8] Apparently, their difference in cultural background notwithstanding, the ancient Chinese and Westerners before the eighteenth century all traced the origin of language to a remote and nebulous past enshrouded in myths and legends, and credited the creation of writing to a supernatural or divine agency, a mysterious *tao* or an anthropomorphic God as *logos*, that impregnated nature with meaning. "Myth, language and art," as Ernst Cassirer observes, "begin as a concrete, undivided unity, which is only gradually resolved into a triad of independent modes of spiritual creativity" (98).

Nevertheless, it is a misleading exaggeration to claim that the book of nature and the concept of language in its raw, historical and material being exemplify the mythical, premodern *epistemes* which distinguish the mentality of the sixteenth century from the scientific thinking of the seventeenth, and which are replaced in a sudden break of the older tradition by a set of new cultural codes, new epistemes of a Cartesian rationalism or a Newtonian world view. "The western world's way of perceiving the world," as Ken Robinson puts it, "did not change suddenly on 10 November 1619 when Descartes realized the full significance of mathematics for man's knowledge of the natural world, nor in the autumn of 1665 in Newton's garden at Woolesthorpe when he supposedly recognized that there was a special providence in the fall of an apple" (Cain and Robinson 86-7). Not only did the new scientific and philosophical thinking reach back to the medieval time and Greek antiquity, to the technical experiments of the alchemists and astrologers or the speculations of the atomists and natural philosophers, but older ways of seeing the world persisted and became integrated into newer ones. The book of nature, says Robinson, is a shared "common image" at the time, but there emerge two different books from two perspectives:

> On one view, which carries over from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, the book is a remarkable tissue of correspondences or resemblances which require allegorical, mystical-religious reading; on the other it is written in the language of mathematics, not in the language of Pythagorean and Neoplatonic number symbolism which Renaissance architects had spatialized to embody in their creations the pristine harmonies of the music of the spheres, but in the new mathematics which sharply divided qualities from quantities and saw its province as the latter (89).

In other words, the book of nature does not necessarily fall into the category or vocabulary of the mystical-religious, the archaic concept of language as natural signs coined in divine creation. Nor does the Chinese concept of *wen,* which has richer connotations than Liu Xie's cosmological reading in the first chapter of his book allows and which has, before Liu Xie in the period of Wei and Jin, already acquired the specific meaning of literature as the art of writing.

Bent on highlighting cultural differences as he is, François Jullien also acknowledges that "the Western tradition is not unacquainted with the whole connection by analogy between the order of text and that of nature." He cites some of Curtius's examples of "the book of nature" and finds that notion somewhat comparable with Liu Xie's idea of *wen*, but he goes on to point out two major differences: the first has to do with the "trajectory" or the order in which notions of natural sign and human sign are constructed, because "the Western analogy starts from the book (*the* 'Book') and proceeds from there to conceive of nature, while in China, the idea of *wen* doubtless has first the meaning of natural figuration before signifying a 'graphic sign' and 'a written text'" (52). The second difference has something cultural or religious to it because the Western "book of nature," according to Jullien, is just a "rhetorical assimilation;" its meaning "is exclusively that of reading and deciphering," while in China, "in the absence of the entire theology of revelation, the natural *wen* can be equally conceived as a sign (and as such delivered to a divinatory interpretation), but also prevails spontaneously as a simple effect of figuration, with a purely aesthetic value" (52-3). I feel rather skeptical about the "trajectory" Jullien so assuredly outlines here, for it is questionable whether the Western conceptualization indeed proceeds from book to nature but gets "inverted" in the Chinese "trajectory," which supposedly starts from natural figuration and then goes to human writing. If we trace the meanings of words to their first roots, it is likely that they will all turn out to be concrete and "natural." The word "book," according to the *OED*, is a common Teutonic word "generally thought to be etymologically connected with the name of the beech-tree." If in its etymological sense a "book" is no less natural than the beechen tablets on which its content is inscribed, then the Chinese *wen* in its etymological sense as "a mark of crisscross strokes" is indisputably a sign no less artificial than those inscribed on the bark of a tree. Whatever Liu Xie has had to say about *wen*, the basic definition of "a mark of crisscross strokes" is given in Xu Shen's famous dic-

tionary, *Shuowen jiezi* [Explanation of Words], which is much earlier than Liu Xie's book and a much greater authority for consultation insofar as the meaning of words is concerned.

As for the second difference Jullien mentions, that in China there is indeed no "theology of revelation;" if by that is meant a specifically Christian theology, then a Chinese sign is of course different from a Christian sign. But do we need a sinologist with all his profound knowledge and learning to tell us that China is in Asia and is not in the *Extrême-Occident*, that the Chinese use a language different from French or English, and that the Chinese are not Christians (since we can safely discount all the Chinese converts who are, as judged by the seventeenth-century Catholic purists, "merely aping the Truth" [Saussy 39])? If Chinese writing as *wen* is a set of natural signs and fundamentally different from Western writing, then why call *wen* writing in the first place? If, as Jullien suggests by citing Heidegger's "conversation with a Japanese," Eastern notions and ideas are "necessarily distorted (*dénaturées*) and impoverished as soon as they are transposed in the framework of Western thinking, as soon as they are expressed *in the language* of the West," one can imagine how enormously ironic and self-defeating it must be for sinologists like Jullien to write their books in French, German, or English instead of classical Chinese. Of course, Jullien argues that the Chinese or Japanese themselves cannot do any better, for native scholars in modern China or Japan have been Westernized, and once they are "initiated into Western concepts," they tend to "project, perhaps too directly, categories borrowed from the West onto their own cultural tradition." In trying to "translate" the notions of their own literary and critical tradition into a modern idiom under Western influence, they tend to "*forget* the proper, original meaning" of those notions (10). But if those ancient Chinese notions are untranslatable, according to Jullien, even within the same language from classical into modern Chinese, then how can he be so sure, as a twentieth-century sinologist writing "*in the language* of the West," to *remember* the "proper, original meaning" of those notions that the modern Chinese themselves have forgotten? On what ground can he claim that his French remembrance of Chinese notions has preserved the essence of the Chinese tradition? Here we seem to have another version of the familiar biblical story of the loss of innocence, in which classical Chinese in its pure essence assumes the role of the prelapsarian language once spoken in the Garden of Eden, which is now hopelessly lost among the fallen native speakers in modern China, and which the Western sinologist tries in vain to recuperate. Does not this picture strike one as tinted in a distinctly Christian color?

To be sure, the will of heaven is not human, and for Liu Xie, there is no anthropomorphic God behind all those splendid colors, shapes, and patterns in the book of nature, but he also has his share of religious mysticism when he remarks that "The origin of human writing began in the Ultimate One," that in antiquity the prototypical map and book emerged miraculously from the Yellow River and the Lo River, brought out of the water by a dragon or

a sacred turtle, and that ultimately it is *tao* or "divine reason" (*shenli*) that regulates the manifestation of all patterns and all writing (1). What is perhaps typically Chinese is Liu Xie's emphasis on the central role of the sages as both human and sacred in the sense that they alone are privileged to know the mysterious *tao* and that the meaning of *tao* becomes manifest in their writings. Hence the claim that "*tao* shows the pattern by way of the sages, and the sages make *tao* manifest in their writing" (2). As Jullien also remarks, human writing becomes essential once it is generated, and the genesis of literary creation depends on "these three fundamental terms: the *tao* as the cosmological-moral totality, the sage as the prime author (and, at the same time, the author *par excellence*), and the canonical text as the prime text (and, at the same time, the text *par excellence*)" (40). The centrality of human writing makes it possible for Liu Xie to launch out a detailed discussion of the various literary genres, and the exemplariness of Confucian classics provides the basis for him to conceive of writing not primarily in terms of literature or poetry, but as a means to the illumination of *tao*. It is in this context that we can understand why Liu Xie continues to expound, in the second chapter, the idea of seeking models in the works of the sages (*zheng sheng*) and, in the third, the idea of devoutly following the examples of the Confucian classics (*zong jing*).

Most commentators are quick to point out that it was in reaction to the lavishly ornamental form and the excessive attention to the rhythm and musicality of language, a tendency characteristic of literary writing in his time—the Qi and Liang era,—that Liu Xie proposed the idea of following nature in following the classics as models. "The use of writing," he declares, "is indeed that of the branches and twigs of the classics." He then reprehends the tendency of his time in which, as he puts it, "remote from the sages, the norm of writing is broken and scattered. Writers now love the strange and cherish the flashy and the grotesque in language; they apply paint on colorful feathers, and they embellish their writing like putting embroidery on embroidered ribbons and shawls. The farther away their writing drifts from the origin, the more corrupt and inordinate will it become" (534). Most critics would justify Liu Xie's call of "back to nature and the classics" as a necessary antidote against extravagant formalism. In viewing writing as subservient to the illumination of *tao* and calling on writers to follow the classics, Liu Xie strengthened the didactic and moralistic tendency in traditional Chinese criticism, and his influence in this respect is yet to be fully evaluated in the study of the history of Chinese literary criticism.

In *Wenxin diaolong*, however, Liu Xie's primary concern is the art of human writing. Despite all the talk about the cosmic origin of *wen* in his grandiose and mystifying little preamble, the most famous chapters of his book do offer some insights into the writing process as a process of literary creation. Chapter 26, for example, gives a vivid description of how writers go beyond the limitations of time and space to envisage things not present at hand:

"Though my body is by the river and at sea, my mind still resides under the gate of the high palace." This ancient saying characterizes miraculous ideas. The spirit of the ideas in writing indeed stretches far out. So in pensive tranquility, your thoughts may touch things of a thousand years ago, and in quietly changing your countenance, your eyes can see all ten thousand miles. In chanting your poetry, every word you pronounce has the tinkling sound of pearls or jade, and before your eyes, wind and clouds unfold their shape and color (295).

The ancient saying Liu Xie quoted here is a phrase from the *Zhuangzi* (see Guo Qingfan xxviii, 421), and it is used here to demonstrate that the movement of the mind, unlike that of the body, is not restricted by space or a specific location. Thus the phrase is borrowed, as Wang Yuanhua maintains, to give "Liu Xie's definition of imagination" (105). The "miraculous ideas" (*shensi*, literally, divine or superhuman thoughts) is Liu Xie's term for imagination, and his depiction of the author's mind and vision as reaching out beyond the confines of the present time and place clearly indicates "that the activity of imagination has the capacity to break through the limitations of the experience of senses, and that it is a psychological phenomenon unconfined by the physical environment" (Wang Yuanhua 106).[9] Aided by imagination, that is, the capability of drawing mental pictures of things long ago, far away, or even nonexistent, the Chinese poet is able to create things not immediately present at hand. That is to say, the Chinese poet does not just pick up a poem as something ready-made in nature and does not just make "strictly true" statements as a literal response to the concrete situation. Indeed, the notion that Chinese poetry is a factual account of real experience is so fragile and untenable that it is easily disproved by the first instance of hyperbolic expressions so frequently found in Chinese as in any other poetry. The use of such basic rhetorical devices makes it impossible to consider poetic language to be factual and strictly true, as Liu Xie himself points out in chapter 37, which is devoted to a discussion of hyperbolic descriptions (*kuashi*): "Thus in speaking of height, the cliff is said to reach to the sky; in stressing closeness, the river is described as unable to hold a skiff; in emphasizing plentifulness, it is said that the descendants number in the thousands of millions; and in underscoring paucity, it is said that not a single survivor is left." Citing these examples from *The Book of Poetry* and other classics, Liu Xie concludes that "though the language is excessive, the meaning is not misleading" (404). The poet, he observes, can either "fabricate (*zao*) writing to express emotions" or "fabricate emotions for the sake of writing," of which he approves the former but not the latter; but whatever his preference, he clearly recognizes literary writing as making or fabrication (347). In other words, Liu Xie realizes that poetry is not to be understood as literally true, and that it expresses the truth of human emotions and the human condition in a manner different from factual accounts.

When we go beyond Liu Xie to examine the question of fact and fiction in the Chinese literary tradition, the alleged Chinese literalism becomes even

more dubious. It is a critical commonplace that sorrow and suffering are better suited for poetry than happiness, an idea aptly summed up in Confucius's famous saying that poetry is able "to give vent to one's grievances" (Liu Baonan xvii.9, 374). Once poets realize that the sorrowful moves readers and audiences more easily than the joyful, however, the expression of sorrow tends to become a poetic topos that may well express sufferings fabricated to achieve an emotional effect rather than articulate real grievances. Not every poet is willing to suffer personally in order to write touching poetry. "Consequently we find a situation that has been with us for a long time," as Qian Zhongshu points out in a brilliant essay on this subject, "that poets hope to pay nothing or at least a reduced price for writing good poetry. Thus the young write to lament over their 'old age,' moneybags write to deplore their 'poverty,' and those who live a comfortable life of leisure write to express their 'sorrow of spring' or 'sadness at autumn'" (*Qi zhui ji* 111).[10] Of the copious examples Qian cites in his essay, the most amusing one concerns an obscure figure by the name of Li Tingyan, who once sent to his superior a poem that contains this heart-rending couplet: "My younger brother passed away south of the Yangtze River,/My elder brother died in the borderland up north!" His superior was deeply touched and gave him his condolences, but Li respectfully disclosed that "nothing of the sort really happened, and that that was done simply for making neat parallelism with a personal touch." The man, of course, quickly became everybody's laughingstock, and someone made a sequel to his couplet: "As far as the parallelism is neat,/I don't care having double funerals."[11] Qian Zhongshu's sarcastic comment goes right to the heart of the matter:

> Apparently, this chap Li was writing his poem according to the principle that "words of misery and sorrow may well please," and he knew quite well that poetry should present concrete images and that one should find the proper objective correlative for the emotion expressed. Had his superior not shown his concern and not asked him on the spot, latter-day scholars like us who have been so deeply influenced by positivism may not suspect that this fellow was "making up sorrowful words without feeling sorrow" (112).

The same critical attitude is necessary not just in reading a bad poem like Li's but in reading the classics as well. One poem from *The Book of Poetry*, mentioned earlier in Liu Xie's discussion of hyperboles, describes the great Yellow River as though it were a small stream: "Who says the River is wide?/It cannot even hold a skiff" (*Mao shi* 326). Yet another poem from the same classic speaks of the Han River in a totally different manner: "Oh, so wide is the Han River/That one can never swim across" (*Mao shi* 282). The difference here shows not so much the actual width of the two rivers as the ways in which the speakers in the two poems feel about them. To emphasize that homeland is just across the Yellow River to the south, the speaker in the first poem exaggerates the closeness by minimizing the width of the River. In the second instance, however, the width of the Han River is maximized to express the idea that the girl on the yonder bank is simply out of

reach. The truth the poems articulate is the psychological truth of feelings and emotions, not factual statement about the rivers. "If based on these poems," says Qian Zhongshu jokingly, "someone would try to figure out the geography and the measurement of the place, and then cite the lines to prove that the Han is wider than the Yellow River, that man would indeed be the idiot to whom one cannot confide one's dreams" (*Guan zhui bian* 1: 94). Of course, no one is so literal-minded as to take such poetic lines as proof of the relative width of the two rivers. Not only cannot such hyperbolic lines be understood literally, but poetry as fabrication can be literally false to the concrete situation or historical reality without being false to the psychological truth it is meant to express.

A good example is a poem entitled "Zhouqiao" ["The Old Capital Bridge"] by Fan Chengda (1126-1193):

> South and north of the Bridge runs the main thoroughfare,
> Where old folks await His Majesty year after year.
> Scarcely holding back tears, they asked the royal envoy:
> "When will our great armies really come back here?"

This is one of the poems Fan wrote in 1170 when he was sent on a diplomatic mission to the court of the Jurchens, a Tungusic nomadic tribe that had taken much of the northern part of the Song territories, and the bridge in the poem is the famous bridge in Bianliang, the old capital of the Northern Song, lost to the Jurchens in 1126 and now under enemy occupation. In his critical notes to this poem, Qian Zhongshu shows how Fan Chengda drew two different pictures of what he had seen in Bianliang. In his diary that covers the same events, Fan writes that "people there have long adopted the barbarian customs, and their attitudes and tastes have all changed." From similar records kept by other emissaries to the Jin court, it is clear that no old folks in occupied territories, even if they were still loyal to the Song, could be audacious enough to make direct contact with the envoy from the Song court and openly request their "great armies" to come and deliver them from foreign rule. And yet, Fan's poem describes them as doing just that. The scene described cannot be true to the poet's real experience, but it expresses his own feeling at seeing those old folks and may have indeed expressed a secret desire buried in their hearts as he had detected or imagined. The difference between Fan's poem and his diary, as Qian Zhongshu comments, "makes it clear that to describe realistically in literature does not mean to be overwhelmed by the superficial trivialities of daily life" (*Song shi xuanzhu* 224). Even if the poem takes as its material an episode in the author's life and refers to a specific historical moment, that lived experience is nevertheless transformed and *fictionalized* in poetic expression, and as a result the poetic construction becomes true to the feelings expressed in the poem but not necessarily true to the particular situation as the poet himself experienced.

And yet, some sinologists would have us believe that Chinese poetry is not to be read as fictional construction but as literal response to the stimula-

tion of things in the world, and that Chinese poets compose their works by simply noting down whatever appears at the scene in front of them. Their argument presents Western literature as mimetic, fictional, and creative, but Chinese literature as non-mimetic, literal, and uncreative. The fact that such an argument has a certain currency in the circle of sinological studies indicates that cultural relativism, as David Buck maintains, is the paradigm "advanced with much more frequency among Asianists" than univeralist views (32). In reading Liu Xie against the naturalist argument, I want to question not only the untenable dichotomies between Chinese and Western literatures and cultures, but also the paradigm of cultural relativism itself that makes cross-cultural understanding utterly impossible and ultimately defeats the very purpose of Asian studies and, for that matter, any intellectual pursuit. From this one particular instance, I hope that we can move on to a critical re-examination of more general and paradigmatic issues that inform what we do as sinologists or Asianists and how we do it.

NOTES

[1] While insisting on the nonfictionality of *shi* or Chinese poetry, Owen does allow a certain degree of metaphoricity or fictionality in some subgenres, especially *yuefu* or songs collected by the official "music bureau." See ibid., 53 and a long explanatory note, 292-93.

[2] Fenollosa's reading of Chinese characters, Joseph Riddel also argues, is "a purely western idealization" (Riddel, "'Neo-Nietzschean Clatter'—Speculation and/on Pound's Poetic Image," in *Ezra Pound: Tactics for Reading*, ed. Ian E. A. Bell [London: Vision, 1982], 211).

[3] For an early argument that presents Chinese as the first or prelapsarian language of natural religion, see John Webb, *An Historical Essay Endeavoring a Probability That the Language of the Empire of China is the Primitive Language* (London: Printed for Nath. Brook, 1669).

[4] Curtius also emphasizes the medieval origin of this symbolic view: "It is a favorite cliché of the popular view of history that the Renaissance shook off the dust of yellowed parchment and began instead to read in the book of nature or the world. But this metaphor itself derives from the Latin Middle Ages" (319). For the close relation between the metaphysical interpretation of the hieroglyphics and the idea of the book of nature, see also Irwin 20, 25, 28.

[5] Fletcher further notes that "In the seventeenth century, when the meaning of Egyptian hieroglyphics became a much-bruited problem, there was a general adherence to this view that Nature constituted a universal vocabulary of symbols" (130 n. 105).

[6] According to the first Chinese dictionary, *Shuowen jiezi* [Explanation of Words], completed by Xu Shen in the year 110, the basic meaning of *wen* is a mark of crisscross strokes. Wang Jun (1784-1854), among many other philological commentators, further explains: "'Crisscross' refers to the lines that pass one another crosswise to make a drawing. In the 'appended words' to the *Book of Changes*, it is said that 'when things are mixed with one another, it is called *wen*.' To mix here means to crisscross" (Wang Jun, *Shuowen judou* [Notes on the Explanation of Words], 4 vols. [Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1983], 2:1210). In later usage, however, the character almost

exclusively refers to writing or literary writing, while a homophone *wen* is used to signify pattern or design. For a brief discussion of the prehistory of Chinese writing, see K. C. Chang, *Art, Myth, and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1983), 81-87. For a brief summary of the different meanings of *wen* in Chinese texts, see James J. Y. Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1975), 7-9, 22-24.

[7] See the *xici* and *shuo gua* sections of the *Book of Changes*: "The being of *yi* comes from the Ultimate One, which generates the Two Standards." "The way to form heaven is to have the *yin* and the *yang*; the way to form earth is to have the soft and the hard; and the way to form man is to have benevolence and rightness. There must be the Three Origins and they must be doubled, so in the *Book of Changes* every hexagram is made of six lines" (*Zhouyi zhengyi* [The Correct Meaning of the Book of Changes], 70a, 81c-82a, in Ruan Yuan [1764-1849], *Shisan jing zhushu* [The Thirteen Classics with Annotations], 2 vols. [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980], 1:82, 93-94).

[8] We can compare this notion of language as part of an extension of nature, the idea that language signifies by way of similarities and analogies, with Owen's discussion of analogy and the Chinese notion of *lei*, which he translates as "natural category" (See Owen, *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics* 18, 61, 294).

[9] Most Chinese critics understand the concept of *shensi* as "imagination." Wang Yunxi, for example, also remarks that in discussing the composition of a literary work, Liu Xie depicts the writer as "immersed in an imagined world and closely related to things of his imagination" (Wang and Yang 433). While acknowledging that the concept of *shensi* "evokes the capacity of spontaneous transcendence in thinking, with regard to a person's physical limitation, in space as well as in time," Jullien objects to this Chinese elevation of Liu Xie's concept into "a complete theory of imagination'" because in that case, "the notion of imagination would have been born in China a good millennium earlier than with us [in the West]," and also because the word *shensi* "maintains in itself no semantic relation with the idea of image'" (Jullien, "Naissance de l'«imagination»: Essai de problématique au travers de la réflexion littéraire de la Chine et de l'Occident," *Extrême-Orient—Extrême-Occident* 7 [1985]: 25). In translating Liu Xie's *shensi* into "imagination" in modern Chinese, however, we are dealing with equivalents, not identicals; and it is undeniable that Liu Xie is talking here about the mental capacity of evoking things and images not directly present but created in the mind for literary expression, which is what "imagination" means.

[10] The Chinese title of Qian's essay ("Shi keyi yuan") is the famous quote from *The Analects*, xvii.9, that "Poetry can give vent to one's grievances," but the English title Qian himself prefers ("Our Sweetest Songs") is not a direct translation but a quote from Shelley's famous poem, "To a Skylark," that articulates the same basic idea the essay discusses: "Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought." The numerous examples quoted in this essay from both Chinese and Western literatures make a strong case for the universal appeal of the tragic and the sorrowful as both a critical concept and a poetic topos.

[11] The story seems to be very popular among Chinese men of letters, and Qian Zhongshu gives three different textual sources that date from the fourteenth century. On the surface, the story seems to confirm Owen's point that Chinese readers, like Li's superior, tend to read poems as though they were factual accounts, but the point of the story is precisely to discredit such literal reading of fictive (and fictitious) texts. Li's gullible superior certainly does not impress us as a sophisticated reader of poetry.

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